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Casey Aide Held to Have Quit CIA to Work for North

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WASHINGTON—A special assistant to former CIA Director William J. Casey quit the intelligence agency early last year and went to Europe to secretly help manage White House aide Oliver L. North's private network to aid the Nicaraguan *contras*, according to government sources.

The former Casey aide, 46-year-old Ben B. Wickham Jr., was CIA station chief in Managua, Nicaragua, from 1982 until the autumn of 1984. He later served Casey at CIA headquarters for about a year before resigning to work for one of North's dummy companies abroad, said knowledgeable officials who refused to be identified.

The CIA refused to comment when asked in mid-March and again Thursday about Wickham's activities. The agency has said in the past that it obeyed congressional restrictions on CIA-backed military aid to the *contras*.

Sources have called Wickham a potentially critical link in the chain of Swiss bank accounts, dummy firms and covert deals through which North ran the ill-fated arms-for-hostages swap with Iran and a multimillion-dollar secret military aid program for the Nicaraguan rebels.

One knowledgeable official contended that Wickham resigned his CIA post at the suggestion of Casey, who is said by some to have orchestrated North's secret contra supply activities after Congress cut off funding for the rebels in October, 1984.

'Casey's Eyes and Ears'

"Find Ben and you'll find all the keys to Ollie's operations," this official said. "One reason he left the CIA was to be Casey's eyes and ears on what North was doing in Europe." Wickham went to Europe "to work for one of North's private groups on Nicaragua—a Project Democracy operation," this source said.

But another government source said that Wickham left the CIA on his own. Wickham's "first-hand" duty in Managua, this source said, convinced him that the United States would become mired in a war there unless Americans acted privately, unfettered by congressional curbs on aid to the *contras*, to overturn the Marxist government.

"He quit. Casey didn't send him," that source said flatly. He added that he did not know whether Casey offered Wickham advice or other aid after he left the agency.

Whereabouts Unknown

Precisely where and for whom Wickham worked remains a mystery. His current whereabouts also are a mystery.

The Wall Street Journal, which first raised the issue publicly in a story Thursday on Casey, stated that a former Casey aide retired in late 1985 to work "overseas" for North.

A number of companies with ties to North are either based in Switzerland or have bank accounts or dummy addresses there. They include Lake Resources Inc., which controlled the flow of money for the Iran arms deal and secret aid to

the *contras*, and Stanford Technology Corp., a firm controlled by North's principal private-sector aides in the Iran-contra deal, Iranian-born businessman Albert A. Hakim and retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord.

In computer messages and other North transcripts reprinted in February by a presidential commission that investigated the Iran affair, North characterized Hakim as the European director of his contra aid network. Hakim, who lives in California, frequently visited Europe on missions for North.

Cryptic References

North's transcripts make occasional cryptic references to his European operations. At one point, they state that a "Democracy INC. European subsidiary" owned a Lear jet used to ferry North on part of his journey last May to Tehran.

Little is known about Wickham, reportedly a low-key career CIA undercover officer whose political beliefs are as secret as his true work. An unclassified State Department directory listed him as a diplomatic attache in Tehran in 1971.

He is believed to have held the State Department post of political officer after moving to Managua in the fall of 1982 but to have done little, if any, intelligence work related to the *contras'* effort to bring down the Nicaraguan government.

One associate nevertheless described him as committed to the contra cause. He said that friends could not dissuade Wickham from dropping a promising CIA career to

organize private aid for the rebels.

By that account, Wickham told friends that the U.S. government had "pulled the chain" on the *contras* and that his children would be fighting in Nicaragua unless he did something on their behalf.

Other officials, however, said that Wickham's CIA resignation and hiring by North parroted the actions of other former intelligence officers who joined the secret North network in 1985 and 1986.

Those officials have alleged that Casey singled out former CIA employees to join North's efforts to sidestep Congress' ban on direct U.S. involvement in military or training assistance to the *contras*.

The Times reported in February that North and Casey met regularly, beginning in 1984 and continuing through last fall, to discuss the *contras'* military and financial conditions in the wake of Congress' prohibition on aid.

Training for Rebels

Last Saturday, The Times reported that North's contra aid operations in Honduras were led in part by a CIA officer who quit the agency roughly at the time he joined the North network. That account stated that at least two men under contract to the agency worked part time training the rebels in Honduras.

Casey underwent surgery for a malignant brain tumor in December and has been in poor health, reportedly unable to speak, since then.

Staff writer Doyle McManus contributed to this story.